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ABSTRACT

A library for the blind is a good public library which deals in several media: Braille, tape, and large type. Such a library has the capability and dedication to provide each patron with personalized service, transcribing materials from regular print on demand. Organizations that simply select books made available the Library of Congress for mail circulation do not provide a library service. The Division for the Blind and Physically Handicapped shouldn't reprint every edition once every five years, on the assumption that the books are worn out, but rather add new books to their collection. The "Testimony of the National Federation of the Blind Concerning Library Service for the Blind in the Mountain Plains Region" affixed to this document emphasizes that libraries for the blind must be attentive and responsive to the ever-changing needs of the blind patron. (KC)

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WHAT SHOULD A LIBRARY FOR THE BLIND BE?

by
Florence Grannis

(Editor's note: Mrs. Grannis is Assistant Director in charge of Literary and Social Services, Iowa Commission for the Blind.)

Let's look at the basic philosophy a library is built upon--the borrowers of a library for the blind should have the same library service they would have if they were not blind and lived in a good library area. What does this mean? That each person have the books and information he wants when he wants them. In other words, a library for the blind is a public library using--mostly--other media than regular print. In one way a library for the blind has an edge on an ordinary library--the library for the blind can and should produce special material to order. If a reader needs four references on the manufacture of glass and the library has only one, it can Braille, tape or large type three others. If he needs to write a history of Standard Oil and the most diligent search locates only a brief magazine article on it in the library's collection, there will be undoubtedly some good print information in an institution nearby which can be quickly transcribed into the desired medium.

Someone wishes to pass his high school equivalency tests--where does the library come in? There are very effective print books designed to help achieve this goal.

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A library for the blind should have all these books in Braille, tape, large type, and, in addition, math books, spelling books, vocabulary books, etc., should be available in all media to help him strengthen his areas of weakness. Down the line the library should be a resource for each blind person in his community. Someone is studying restaurant management. He should know the facts relating to wines and how to serve them--the library can supply these facts. He should know how to keep books--the library can help him here.

The blind home-maker belongs to a women's club and needs to read the books on the club's reading list. The library should be able to supply them on the desired time schedule. When she takes her turn giving the club program the library can give her books on the topic she has chosen, or provide suggestions for a topic. It can also give her books which will guide her in giving a good speech. When it is her turn to provide refreshments for the other ladies in the group, her library can send her cookbooks and any hints she may desire about proper procedures.

Historically, libraries are said to be the people's universities. A good library for the blind has an ideal opportunity to fill this function. Through telephone, personal, or letter conference all sorts of courses of study can be planned and through on-going communication they can be adhered to or deviated from as the readers desire. The library can provide bibliographies on virtually any subject. It can answer questions on practically any topic.

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Agencies that simply select books supplied by the Library of Congress for borrowers and ship them to them are not libraries and are not filling a library function. What is more patronizing than for someone in a remote library office to decide the books the library patrons should read? Can I know what Mary Williams in Peru wants to read because I know she is 45 years old and a high school graduate? Even if I have talked to her on the phone or had a few personal contacts with her, can I know? Just because she has filled in a form that says she wants to read romance, can I know whether she wants Gone with the wind, David Copperfield or Couples? Surely, it takes more time to send Mrs. Williams the exact books she has asked for, just when she wants them, but every library exists only to give service! If Mrs. Williams has no way of preparing a list we can phone her and discuss books, or send a volunteer or paid staff member so that she can get the books she wants, when she wants them.

Fewer than half the people eligible for services from the libraries for the blind use them. Why? Some people simply don't want to read and they have every right not to, but there are undoubtedly people who simply don't use the services because they find nothing they want. Maybe their wants are "way out"--science fiction, the Greek classics, The sensuous woman, The sensuous man. But the libraries should have the "way out" books and be in a position to serve well the borrowers they may have

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as well as those already registered.

The talk among the people of the Division for the Blind and Physically Handicapped is that a library for the blind cannot have a balanced collection because books in their media cannot be expected to last more than five years. This is partly because they believe books will be worn out in this time (that is, blind people cannot be expected to be careful of them so that they will last), it is also because the libraries are generally counseled to simply send books out to borrowers, not to register which books go out to which borrowers--that is, not to check them out and to check them in according to regular library procedure. The implication is clear that blind people cannot be expected to behave as regular responsible citizens. Since the Division operates on the premise that the books cannot last more than five years, it sends some of their three million dollars of our tax money down the tubes each year to reproduce some books that should still be in good condition in each library. For example, we have a fine collection of recorded Christmas stories which are read moderately at Christmas time only. They should surely be in the collection but inevitably they sit on the shelf except at Christmas time and our six copies are complete and in excellent condition. But the Division issued this book again and this means one more new book we can't have. Similarly in Braille we have pristine copies of Du Jardin's Double date which goes out now and again, but is never on reserve--along comes now

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copies we neither want nor need, and we have to hand Braille War and peace! Without the Division, however, we cannot have a good regional library since it causes most of our books to be produced.

To summarize: An agency that simply selects books supplied by the Library of Congress and sends them to borrowers is not truly a library. A library for the blind should supply present borrowers and potential borrowers the books and information they want when they want them. To do this the library should avail itself of all possible national and international resources for Braille, large type and recorded material. I should have an ample core of volunteers with high standards to produce needed material. Above all, a good library for the blind must demonstrate that it exists only to give service.

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TESTIMONY OF THE NATIONAL FEDERATION OF THE BLIND CONCERNING LIBRARY SERVICE FOR THE BLIND IN THE MOUNTAIN PLAINS REGION: PRESENTED TO THE NATIONAL COMMISSION ON LIBRARIES AND INFORMATION SCIENCE, AUGUST 16, 1974.

To have good library services for the blind in any area, a three-pronged approach would be helpful:

(1) Convince the administrators that blind people deserve and can make use of excellent library services. That, given proper training and opportunity, blind people can be tax-paying citizens in the mainstream of society. See attached: "What should a library for the blind be?" "What services are reasonable to expect from a library for the blind?" These articles outline somewhat standardized concepts blind people have developed concerning their library services.

(2) Provide guidelines for good library service. Guidelines that would be meaningful and stimulating for administrators, library personnel and borrowers. (The input of the patron is nearly as important as the output of the library.) See attachments already mentioned.

(3) Have communication and interchange between all the area libraries as well as with those in the remainder of the nation, making use of the Union Catalog being developed at the Division of the Blind and Physically Handicapped of the Library of Congress, national WATS lines, regional library association meetings and all other appropriate informational forums.